

# EMOTIONS RESTORED THROUGH FOOD IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI's *The Mistress of Spices*

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## Abstract:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian born American writer famous for almost all her works. She is known for her diasporic writings, where women experience their second phase in their life. Her women characters are stuck in between the old and new tradition. And she is well known for her use of Magic Realism, where the reality is blended with magic. But apart from this, food plays a role in her writing. We consider food as a common thing, but its role in both life and literature is not the same. When we analyse it in literary sense, food acts as a symbol for identity, relationship, culture and emotions. This paper focuses on how emotions are evoked through food in *Mistress of Spices*. Few characters are mentioned and how they are affected by memories, nervousness and so on.

Whenever we come across the word 'food', spontaneously our mind thinks about eating habits and of course our favourite ones. It is a fundamental need in our everyday life for all the human beings in the world. Even though it looks as a very usual thing but it matters a lot. Food study is not a very new concept in literature, because it emerged in the renaissance period. But only now in modern period, it has become prominent. Many writers in their work of art have spoken about the importance of food. Typically people don't see the hidden meaning grounded in the text. They just view it from the literal sense and not from the literary sense. Food studies are related to cultural study, since it goes hand by hand. Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard in "Introduction" chapter of *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature*, argues "food is fundamental to literature:" If food is fundamental to life and a substance upon which civilizations and cultures have built themselves, then food is also fundamental to the imagination and the imaginary arts. Food is fundamental to the imagination, because food is fundamental to culture". Food plays a very important role in women's literature, because they are very much close to them.

One such writer of recent days is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is an Indian- American poet, novelist and currently working as professor at The University of Houston Creative Writing Programme. Her writings are mostly known for role of women, how they face the struggle in acculturation, magic realism, and family bonding. She has a unique way of narrative style in her works. In *Mistress of Spices*, the chapters are divided and named after each spices. Like other diasporic writers, she got settled in US, but not able to detach herself away from her motherland (India). Divakaruni sprays these attribute on the characters. One such character is Tilo from *The Mistress of Spices*, who settles in America but owns a spice shop in remembrance of her birthplace.

Food is the one which accord an identity for the protagonist Tilo. Since she was the second daughter in her family, her parents thought she might be a burden to them. She was born with supernatural powers like, able to see what is going to happen in the future. Tilo also possess the power to read about a person's past by looking at them. When people started to know about her powers they tried to capture her by attacking her parents. But she escapes from them and moves along a shore. It was there she was saved by a group of girls along with the first mother. Later, she is taught to sense the smell of spices and identify them correctly. Named herself as Tilo from Tilottama, Til is the sesame seed. 'I will be Tilottama, the essence of *til* life-giver, restorer of health and hope' (42). She receives an identity not because of the spices, but also from them. Indeed her name is formed from the sesame seed, which is one kind of spices. Since she had born with such ability, was called as 'Mistress of Spices'. And so she named her shop as 'Spice Bazaar'.

She soon sets a spices shop at Oakland in America. Tilo almost converse with the spices and gives life for it. Born in a poor family, she has now attained an identity of her own. She can sense the smell of each spice and could tell their benefits. As an element 'food', it provided her an identity. She was well known by all the people in America because of her spices and the magic it has done to them.

The concept of 'food' is able to create emotions in people and also to cure their physical problems. Each spice has its own origin and growth. 'Spices' are very important element in cooking, which gives flavour to food. Likewise, in this novel Spices give life not only to the protagonist Tilo, but also for other customers. As the novel continues, she gets her first customer Haroun. He has come to America just like Tilo in search of peace. Since he had horrible past, Haroun finds it very difficult to come out from those painful memories. Therefore he ends up in the shop to get relieved himself from that haunted memories. Tilo applies Sandalwood powder on his palms and asks him to rub all over the palm. At that moment he had thoughts bolting in his mind. Once he finishes rubbing the powder, his mind turns into peace. Hence, Sandalwood cures the pain of remembering and this stresses the presence that through food, emotions are been controlled.

The colour 'red' stands for danger or warning. Similarly Red Chilli which appears to be in red follows to have the same characteristic. But what will be the upcoming warning? The danger here is, Tilo notices a man outside the shop and slowly falls for him. She forgets about the rule that her first mother has given. If she is been touched by someone or if she touches anybody, her power will be diminished. Food and eating habits are used to exemplify emotions, memory, relationship, cultural issues. Meanwhile Haroun meet Tilo to share the good news with her, that he got a job as a cab driver in America. Tilo is extremely happy but suddenly the sign of dangers strikes her mind. He is covered with blood and shattered bone inside the car. As soon she thinks of spices to protect him from the evil eye. '*Kalo jire*, I think. Just before the vision comes upon me again, blood and shattered bone and a thin cry like a thread strangling the night. I must get *Kalo jire*, spice of the dark planet Ketu, protector against the evil eye'. (30-31) Therefore she goes inside and cuts the *Kalo jire*, commonly known as 'Black Cumin'. Many people had jealous over him because of his success. This spice is to keep all the evil eyes away from Haroun. But as she was in a hurry, there was a cut in her finger and the blood spilled all through the seeds and it got ruined. She feels regretful due to her distraction.

"Here, let me, he says, and before I can say no he lifts my finger to his lips. And sucks" (108). It was Raven, the man who was standing outside her shop. Tilo knew that she cannot touch anyone, but, at the same time she couldn't control her feelings towards him.

Food and Culture are interrelated concept. When it comes to Indian culture, food element plays a vital role. Later, she gets the second customer for her shop- Jagjit. He came along with his mother, almost holding her shoulder. Jagit was very shy and did not move away from his mother, who felt very embarrassing. When Tilo noticed this, felt sad for him. Since she is the Mistress of Spices, knows how to deal with it. She comes with a small piece of Cinnamon and kept it inside the turban without Jagjit's knowledge. Tilo always trusted her spices that it will not put her down.

Indeed she is the one who has given life to that spices. 'Cinnamon friend- maker, cinnamon *dalchini* warm brown as skin, to find someone who will take you by hand, who will run with you and laugh with you'(40). When Jagjit visits her shop after few days, she is able to perceive the changes happened to him. But she is shocked to know about the negative side of his transformation. Tilo feels sorry for him for the spices did not work him any good. Later she realizes that spices have abandoned her for committing forbidden desire. As Jon D. Holtzman says in his essay, "Food and Memory" that the element food which constructs culture, religion and gender.

In *Mistress of Spices*, food acts as a belief system. Tilo helps in solving the customer's problem only through food. Because she believes that is the only way since her

ancestors followed the same tradition. Actually people are aware of the spices role in food- it gives flavour, aroma, and used for decoration purpose. On the contrary, Chitra Divakaruni has shown a different side of the coin which no one has imagined. She has employed the technique of 'magic realism' by Franz Roh. Even this narrative technique is used with the help of food.

In the end, Tilo comes up decision that she cannot resist her feelings for Raven anymore. Most of the time there is a conversation between Tilo and the spices. So she seeks permission on living with the man Raven for one day and there after she will sacrifice her life for the spices. Therefore she steps out of her shop for the first time along with him. Due to her act, the Red chillies burn into fire and the whole shop is turned to nothing. When she returns, as promised burns herself in the fire. After some time, Raven returns in search of her, but he finds her in danger. He rescues Tilo by putting of the fire. Only then she realizes that nothing has happened to her, because the spices have shown its love towards her. It has not abandoned her at any situation.

This shows that 'spices' not only evokes emotion in people, but also has its own emotion and power. Food is always connected to humans in all ways of life. Through certain characters like Haroun, Raven, Jagjit, we can see how food has cured them as well as punished Tilo for not following the conditions laid by First Mother. Spices have created emotions and at the same time it knows how to control our emotions.

Works Cited:

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